

**[Yi+N] in Mandarin Putonghua**  
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## **1.0 Introduction**

Tsai (2002) examines the syntax and semantics of *yi*, *er*, *san* “one, two, three” and suggests that numerals in Mandarin Chinese can have different semantic interpretations in different syntactic environments. This paper focuses on *yi* in the [yi+N] structure in Mandarin Putonghua, which is not covered in Tsai (2002). This study examines the syntactic distribution of [yi+N] and the semantics of *yi* in the [yi+N] structure and demonstrates that the semantics of *yi* in the [yi+N] structure is sensitive to syntactic factors. In addition, the empirical evidence presented in this paper challenges the shared view in literature (e.g., Chao, 1968; Cheng and Sybesma, 1999) that classifiers are obligatory when numerals are combined with nouns in Mandarin Chinese.

This paper consists of five parts. Section one introduces and justifies the research topic. Section two discusses the types of noun phrases (NPs) in Mandarin Chinese. Section three briefly summarizes the diachronic, typological, and syntactic studies of Chinese NPs in literature and points out that it is commonly assumed that classifiers are mandatory in NPs that consist of a numeral and a nominal referent. Section four presents the distribution pattern of [yi+N] and analyzes the meaning of *yi* in [yi+N]. In the end, I provide a brief conclusion about [yi+N]’s distribution pattern and the interaction between syntactic factors and the interpretation of *yi*.

## **2.0 NPs in Mandarin Chinese**

There are four types of NPs in Mandarin Chinese defined by their internal structure. They are [Num+CL+N], [CL+N], [Num+N], and [N+Num+CL].<sup>1</sup> See the examples in (1)-(4). This study focuses on the [Num+N] structure when the numeral is *yi* ‘one’.

- (1) **[Num+CL+N]:**  
 Liang ge pingguo  
 two CL apple  
 ‘two apples’
- (2) **[CL+N]:**  
 Bang wo ge mang xing ma?  
 help 1SG CL favor ok PAR  
 ‘Could you do me a favor please?’
- (3) **[Num+N]**  
 Bang wo yi mang xing ma?  
 help 1SG one favor ok PAR  
 ‘Could you do me a favor?’
- (4) **[N+Num+CL]:**  
 Rou san jin, baicai liang jin.  
 meat three kilo cabbage two kilo  
 ‘three kilograms of meat and two kilograms of cabbage’

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in this paper are: Num = Numeral, N = Noun, NP=Noun phrase, PAR = Particle, ASP=aspect, MOD= modal, DE=Chinese *de*, CL = Classifier, ASP = Aspect, RET = retroflexion, 1/2/3SG = first/second/third person singular, NOM = nominal, COP = copula

### 3.0 NPs in Mandarin Chinese: A Brief Review

#### 3.1 The diachronic approach

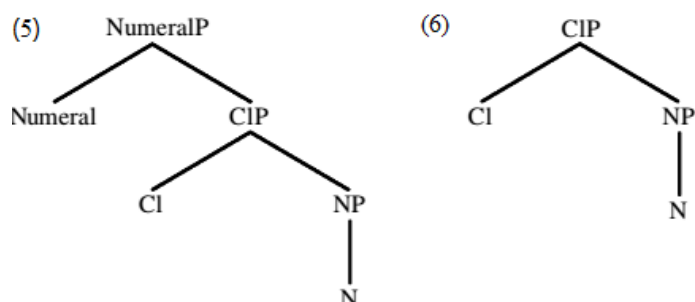
Wang (1958) gives a descriptive analysis of the development of Chinese classifier system from a diachronic linguistic perspective. Based on his analysis of historical documents, Wang suggests that  $[ge+N]$  derives from  $[Num+ge+N]$  (*ge* known as the general classifier). In addition, he proposes that cardinality in the  $[CL+N]$  structure is implied and it has to be one. He further argues that the explicit use of *yi* in  $[yi+CL+N]$  functions only to emphasize the quantity.

#### 3.2 The typological approach

Studies pursuing the typological line of research often link the obligatory appearance of classifiers in Mandarin NPs to transnumerality, i.e. languages' property of not requiring compulsory number marking in nouns (e.g. Bisang, 1998; Greenberg, 1990). It has been argued that Mandarin Chinese is a classifier language and the obligatory use of classifiers in NPs is commonly assumed. Greenberg (1990) suggests that classifiers in transnumeral languages function as individualizers, which perform "the same function as singulative derivational affix in languages with the collective/singulative distinction" (Greenberg, 1990; as cited in Tao, 2003, p. 22). Bisang (1998) also expresses a similar view that classifiers in Chinese allow its native speakers to individualize referents.

#### 3.3 The syntactic approach

Chen and Sybesma (1999) examine the distribution and interpretation of bare nouns,  $[CL+N]$ , and  $[Num+CL+N]$  in Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese. They propose the structure in (5) to account for indefinite NPs and the structure in (6) to account for definite NPs.



In summary, previous studies focus on the use of classifiers in Mandarin NPs. In other words, the obligatory use of classifiers in Mandarin NPs is explicitly/implicitly assumed. The  $[Num+N]$  structure is omitted in many studies. In the next section, I will present evidence to suggest that  $[Num+N]$  is a productive NP structure in Mandarin Chinese, and studies which aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of Mandarin NPs should include discussions on this structure.

### 4.0 $[yi+N]$ is a Productive Structure in Mandarin Chinese

This section aims to provide a description of  $[yi+N]$ 's distribution pattern in Mandarin Chinese. In this section, I examine whether the  $[yi+N]$  structure can appear at the subject and object position in declaratives, negations, and interrogatives. In addition, I discuss the meaning of *yi* in  $[yi+N]$  in the above syntactic environments. The goal is not to isolate *yi* from  $[yi+N]$  or

from the sentences where it occurs. Rather, I aim to observe how the interpretation of *yi* can be affected by syntactic factors.

#### 4.1 [yi+N] as the subject in declarative sentences

[yi+N] as the subject (or as part of the subject) in declarative sentences can either have **indefinite** (7) or **definite** (8) denotations. The semantic meaning of *yi* in (7) is roughly equivalent to the English *certain*. In (8), *yi shu* ‘a book’ and the preceding proper noun are in apposition and the [yi+N] structure has a definite interpretation. *Yi* in (8) roughly means *the* in English.

- (7) You yi ren (er) lai zhao guo ni.  
Exist one people (RET) come find ASP 2SG  
‘There was a guy looking for you.’
- (8) Zhongguo shaoshu minzu wenhua shi yi shu jijiang chuban.  
China minority ethnic.groups culture history one book soon publish  
‘The History of Chinese Ethnic Minority Culture is going to be published soon.’  
(Sun, 1996, p.37)

#### 4.2 [yi+N] as the object in declarative sentences

[yi+N] as the object (or as part of the object) can either have **indefinite** (9-10) or **definite** (11) interpretations. In (9)-(10), *yi* can have either specific or nonspecific denotations depending on tense (realis or irrealis). In (9), [yi+N] can be associated with different aspects in realis tense. The fact that the [yi+N] structure can serve as the subject in the secondary predicate indicates that the [yi+N] structure in (9) has **specific** denotations (Huang, 1987). On the other hand, [yi+N] in (10) is associated with irrealis tense, triggered by the modal verb *hui* ‘will’. [yi+N] in (10) has a **nonspecific** interpretation because it cannot be the subject of a secondary predicate. Regarding semantic meaning, *yi* in (9) and (10) uniformly denotes cardinality *one*.

- (9) a. Zhangsan chi le yi dangao (, tian de rang ren shou bu liao.) (specific)  
Zhangsan eat ASP one cake sweet DE make people bear NEG able)  
‘Zhangsan ate a cake (, which is too sweet to bear).’
- b. Zhangsan chi guo yi dangao (, tian de rang ren shou bu liao.) (specific)  
Zhangsan eat ASP one cake sweet DE make people bear NEG able)  
‘Zhangsan once ate a cake (, which is too sweet to bear).’
- c. Zhangsan zai chi yi dangao (, tian de rang ren shou bu liao.) (specific)  
Zhangsan ASP eat one cake sweet DE make people bear NEG able)  
‘Zhangsan is eating a cake (, which is too sweet to bear).’
- d. Zhangsan chi zhe yi dangao (, tian de rang ren shou bu liao.) (specific)  
Zhangsan eat ASP one cake sweet DE make people bear NEG able)  
‘Zhangsan is eating a cake (, which is too sweet to bear).’
- (10) Zhangsan hui chi yi dangao (\*, tian de rang ren shou bu liao.)(nonspecific)  
Zhangsan MOD eat one cake sweet DE make people bear NEG able)  
‘Zhangsan will eat a cake (\*which is too sweet to bear).’

In (11), *yi shu* ‘a book’ and the preceding proper noun are in apposition as in (8). *Yi* in (11) has a **definite** interpretation, and *yi* roughly means *the* in English.

- (11) Weishengbu      rencai jiaoliao      fuwu      zhongxin zuzhi      xiangguan  
 Ministry of health talent   exchange service center   organize relevant  
 jigou      he   zhuanjia zhuanxie le   *xiangcun yisheng bidu*      yi   shu.<sup>2</sup>  
 organizations and experts   compose ASP rural area doctor   must-read one book  
 ‘The Talent Exchange Center of the Ministry of Health brought together relevant  
 organizations and experts to compose a book entitled *Readings for Doctors in Rural  
 Areas*.’

#### 4.3 [yi+N] as the subject in negations

[yi+N] can only generate grammatical sentences as the subject if co-occurring with modal verbs. [yi+N] in (12) denotes a specific **indefinite** interpretation, and the meaning of *yi* is comparable to *one*.

- (12) a. Mei   you   yi   ren   (er)   neng rang ta   manyi.  
 NEG have one people (RET) can   make him satisfied  
 ‘No one can satisfy him.’  
 b. Zhi   you   yi   ren   (er)   meiyou wancheng zuoye.  
 only exist one people (RET) NEG   finish   homework  
 ‘There is only one person who did not finish his homework.’

#### 4.4 [yi+N] as the object in negations

[yi+N] denotes nonspecific indefinite interpretations as the object in negations. See (13) for example. The meaning of *yi* is similar to *any*.

- (13) a. wo   jiu   bu   xin   ni   mei xihuan guo yi ren   (er).  
 1SG very NEG believe 2SG NEG like   ASP one people (RET)  
 ‘I do not believe that you have not liked anyone before.’  
 b. wo   jiu   bu   xin   ni   conglai dou mei banza guo yi   chaishi.  
 1SG very NEG believe 2SG always all NEG mess up ASP one errand  
 ‘I do not believe that you have not messed things up before.’

#### 4.5 [yi+N] as the subject/object in questions

[yi+N] as the subject (see (14)) and as the object (see (15)) in questions can only have specific **indefinite** interpretations. The semantics of *yi* is comparable to *one*.

- (14) a. yi   ren   (er)   qu   nar?  
 One people (RET) go where  
 ‘Where are you going?’  
 b. You   yi   nianqing nanzi cong   zheli jingguo      ma?  
 Exist one young   guy from here   pass through PAR  
 ‘Did you see a guy passing through?’

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to express my thanks to an anonymous BEAL reviewer for suggesting this example.

- (15) a. Ni xihuan yi guniang?  
 2SG like one girl  
 ‘Is there a girl that you like?’  
 b. Ni diandao yi yaoshi shi ba?  
 2SG pick up one key COP PAR  
 ‘You found a key, right?’

## 5.0 Conclusion

In short, table 1 summarizes the syntactic distribution of [yi+N] in Mandarin Putonghua and the meaning of *yi* in [yi+N]. This study is limited by the range of data, but the preliminary findings of this study lend support to Tsai’s (2002) conclusion that “Chinese numerals not only express cardinality, but also sport various quantificational construals depending on their syntactic positions” (p. 301).

Table 1: [yi+N]’s distribution and *yi*’s meaning

		[yi+N]	the semantics of <i>yi</i>
<b>declaratives</b>	subject	+	certain
			the
	object	+	one
			the
<b>negations</b>	subject	+	one
	object	+	any
<b>questions</b>	subject	+	one
	object	+	one

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